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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001491

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: PRO-THAKSIN CANDIDATE WINS BELLWETHER HOUSE  
BY-ELECTION

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Classified By: POL Counselor George Kent, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) A pro-Thaksin candidate trounced the representative of coalition member Phumjai Thai party in a June 21 House of Representatives by-election in the upper northeastern province of Sakon Nakhon. The election was widely seen as a test of the influence of both former Prime Minister Thaksin and Buriram politician Newin Chidchob. The election appears to confirm Thaksin retains substantial influence in Thai politics, at least in the upper northeast heartland. The result should at least temporarily dampen speculation of defections from the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party to Phumjai Thai; it may also ease some of the pressure that Phumjai Thai has recently placed on the Democrat Party's leaders. End Summary and Comment.

#### A BY-ELECTION WITH NATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS

12. (SBU) Anurak Boonson, candidate of the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party, on June 21 won a by-election for a House of Representatives seat in Sakon Nakhon province, in Thailand's upper Northeast. The by-election took place after the Election Commission disqualified her husband, the Puea Thai candidate who won the seat in December 2007. Anurak defeated Pitak Chansri, from the Phumjai Thai party, which is a member of the governing coalition. According to unofficial results printed in the Bangkok Post daily newspaper, Anurak won 103,277 votes, while Pitak won 47,300. According to staff at the Thai parliament, after Anurak's victory is confirmed, the distribution of seats in the House will be as follows:

Puea Thai.....	188
Democrat Party.....	173
Phumjai Thai.....	32
Motherland Party.....	32
Chart Thai Pattana.....	25
Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana....	9
Pracharaj.....	8
Social Action Party.....	5
Matuphum Party.....	3

Total number of sitting MPs.... 475

¶3. (C) The two candidates and their parties devoted substantial efforts toward their campaigns. Former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, still abroad, phoned canvassers directly, according to press reports. Somphong Amornwiwat, a veteran politician who is informally active in Puea Thai, told us on June 18 that Buriram politician Newin Chidchob (the informal top figure behind Phumjai Thai) had moved operatives from his Buriram base in lower Isaan into Sakon Nakhon to lobby at low levels on Pitak's behalf, and the Sakon Nakhon Governor was distributing funds to lower-ranking officials. (The Governor is under the authority of the Interior Minister, who is a Phumjai Thai official.) Somphong claimed Sakon Nakhon residents were accepting Phumjai Thai money but planned to vote for Puea Thai's candidate regardless, primarily because of their loyalty to Thaksin.

¶4. (C) Somphong told us that the Sakon Nakhon election was a critical test of influence for both Thaksin and Newin. In our June 18 meeting, Somphong claimed that some Puea Thai figures were considering defecting from Puea Thai to Phumjai Thai, but they feared that they would be unable to win a seat in the next election (widely expected to take place within a year) if voters believed they were deserting Thaksin. A Phumjai Thai victory in Sakon Nakhon would likely have emboldened more MPs to shift their allegiance to Phumjai Thai.

¶5. (C) The wide margin of Anurak's victory represents a significant setback for Newin, who has recently been portrayed in the press as enjoying a meteoric rise to "kingmaker" status. Phumjai Thai is currently the second largest member of the Democrat-led coalition, but it may have more difficulty retaining its MPs (to say nothing of drawing others away from Puea Thai), if the party's ability to overcome Thaksin's lingering appeal to northeasterners is in

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doubt.

¶6. (C) Phumjai Thai's loss may work to the advantage of its senior coalition partner, the Democrat Party. In recent weeks, Phumjai Thai had become increasingly aggressive in pushing for certain lucrative government projects. PM Abhisit's image as a clean politician appeared likely to suffer if he allowed these projects to proceed. Phumjai Thai's weak showing in Sakon Nakhon may allow the Democrats to more easily stand up to their junior partner.

¶7. (SBU) Note: The next scheduled by-election will take place in the lower northeastern province of Sisaket on June 28, pitting a Puea Thai candidate against one from Chart Thai Pattana. While Sisaket, unlike Sakon Nakhon, is located in Newin's area of influence, Phumjai Thai has followed traditional Thai practice of coalition parties not running against other coalition parties defending a previously won seat in a by-election.

JOHN